

Argentina: Background information

Some basic information on Argentina:

The Republic of Argentina, located in South America, has a **population** of more than 36 million, of which nearly half live in the Province of Buenos Aires. Metropolitan Buenos Aires, the Capital City, has some 3 million inhabitants.

With an **area** of almost 3,800,000 sq. km, Argentina **borders** on Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil and Uruguay

Argentina has a **climate** where the four seasons are roughly opposite to what we experience in Canada. Spring runs from September through November, with the hotter summer months being from December to March. However, since Argentina covers such a vast area, there is somewhere to visit any time of year.

The Argentine **government** is Representative, Republican and Federal, divided into the executive, legislative and judicial powers. The country is divided into 23 provinces, and the City of Buenos Aires.

The official **language** is Spanish. **Currency** is the Peso. For up to date exchange rates between the Peso and the Canadian Dollar, go to www.oanda.com/convert/classic.

Argentines are justly proud of the quality **items they produce**, including leather goods, woven and knitted garments, silverware, wine and more.

For **tourist information** visit: www.turismo.gov.ar.

A short history of Argentina - Part 1 From first people to Peron

The first people crossed the Bering Strait and reached South America some 30,000 years ago, and Tierra del Fuego about 12,000 years ago.

At the time of the arrival of the first Europeans, the lands that now make up Argentina were sparsely populated with about two-thirds of the indigenous population living in the northwest.

On the 9th of July, 1816, the United Provinces of the River Plate declared their independence from Spain. Jose de San Martin marched his Argentine troops across the Andes to free Chile, and then went north and captured Lima, the first step in the liberation of Peru.

Between the 1870s and 1920s Argentina was transformed economically. The Pampas (prairies) were fenced, ploughed up and turned over to commercial export agriculture. As the British built railways stretching across the country, the sheep industry flourished making Argentina's land owners a fortune through the export of both wool and meat. Refrigerator ships were invented in the 1870s, enabling meat to be shipped in bulk to Britain and to other expanding industrial countries in Europe.

Through the 1920s Argentina was known as the "breadbasket of the world" and was its sixth richest nation. Export markets for Argentine goods were hit hard by the Crash of 1929.

Following a series of military coups, the country returned to civilian rule in 1946 in an election won by Colonel Juan Domingo Peron. His government is chiefly remembered by many Argentines for improving the living conditions for the workers through the introduction of initiatives such as paid holidays and welfare measures. Peron's legacy dominated Argentina for the next two decades.

A short history of Argentina - Part 2

From the 'Dirty War', to the neo-liberal meltdown, to the rise of people's movements

In 1976 the armed forces closed Congress, outlawed political parties, placed trade unions and universities under military control and unleashed the so-called 'Dirty War', a brutal assault on guerilla groups and anyone else who opposed them. As many as 30,000 individuals were disappeared and/or were killed during this period.

The country returned to civilian rule in the 1980s with its economy in ruins and facing a staggering external debt.

In the 1990s under President Carlos Menem, Argentina became Latin America's premier privatizer, a poster child for the neo-liberal economic policies of the IMF. Argentines were told that they would soon become part of the "first world".

In December 2001, however, the bottom fell out of the economy. People were denied access to their own bank accounts while also watching the Peso, along with their savings, devalued to a third of its original worth. Unable to obtain new loans, Argentina defaulted on half its public debt.

Many previously 'middle class' citizens joined with impoverished workers and took to the streets throughout Argentina banging pots and pans chanting "throw them all out". The country went through five presidents in a period of a couple of months, and it plummeted to 'third world' nation status.

Following the 2003 elections, President Nestor Kirchner has shown some staying power thanks in part to a reformist platform that has included some very popular human rights measures along with an effort to highlight IMF responsibility for the country's economic plight.

In response to the neo-liberal meltdown, people's movements have strengthened throughout Argentina and are working at solutions to the problems brought on by the failure of the free market economic system:

- People in Buenos Aires and other urban centres organized themselves into neighbourhood assemblies to fill the void left by the failure of political representation;
- Over 65 factories have been taken over by their workers and transformed into production cooperatives;
- The unemployed have created the piquetero movement, which fights for unemployment compensation from the government by organizing demonstrations and blocking roads throughout the country.